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# **The employment of migrant nannies in the UK: negotiating social class in an open market for commoditised in-home care**

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## **Abstract**

*Migrant women are important sources of labour in the commoditised in-home childcare sector in many regions of the UK. Jobs in this sector, which includes nannies as well as au pairs, babysitters, housekeepers and mothers' helps, are often low paid and low status with pay and conditions being determined by employers' circumstances and whims. This article draws on primary data and secondary sources to illustrate the ways in which employers compare migrant nannies with British nannies and other childcare workers in terms of the social class and formal education levels of different groups, with the aim of explaining why migrants are perceived as high-quality candidates for what are often low-paid, low-status jobs. I argue that employers negotiate inter-class relations in this gendered form of employment by understanding their relationship to the migrant nannies they have employed in the context of broader global inequalities – these inequalities are then reproduced and reaffirmed in private homes and across UK culture and society.*

**Keywords:** class, gender, nannies, domestic workers, employers, migrant workers, ethnic hierarchies

## **Introduction**

The expansion of the EU to the east in 2004, and raised levels of migration to the UK from non-EU states since the late-1990s, has meant an increase in the number of migrant workers available for in-home childcare positions in many areas of the UK. This has gone hand in hand with increased demand for childcare that emerged in the wake of higher levels of female participation in the UK workforce since the 1960s and a growth in the number of women with children working, particularly middle-class women. The increase in female workforce participation has not, though, been accompanied by significant transformations in gender relations in the home, meaning that the 'female' part of many domestic arrangements remains in female hands – not those of the woman herself, but of 'some (ethnically and socially) other woman to whom this work is passed on' (Frieze 1996, cited in Lutz 2008: 47). Labour market deregulation; the scaling back of the welfare state; the growing wealth of the middle class; and the situation in sending countries have also facilitated a growth in paid in-home childcare and domestic work in the UK (Cox 2007; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008). The increased availability of migrant workers to provide commoditised in-home childcare and domestic assistance has, then, facilitated the entry of many middle-class women in the UK to a 'post-feminist paradigm' in which they attempt to reconcile family and work by outsourcing parts of their care work to other, poorer women (Andall 2000). This is particularly so since May 2004, when the UK saw an increasing supply of young, often English-speaking arrivals from the EU accession states who were well placed to provide personal service such as caring for children in private homes at a lower cost than the resident workforce (Anderson et al 2006).

Helma Lutz argues that a further reason migrant women are over-represented in childcare work is that when women apportion care work to the private market place, ‘emotional barriers’ play a specific role because employers will only countenance ‘replacement’ by a childminder when ‘issues of status and responsibility are not in question’ (Lutz 2008: 2. See also Anderson 2000, 2003; Cox 2006, 2010; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Gregson and Lowe 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Momsen 1999; Parreñas 2001; Pratt 1997, 1999a, 1999b). In relation to the question of status, I argue in this paper that employers find migrant women acceptable to work under them in the home because a worker’s different nationality means an employer does not feel they are requiring someone who is too like themselves (in terms of status) to do the ‘dirty work’ of the home. The space between worker and employer is therefore marked by ethnic differences rather than the class differences that have historically separated employers and household staff. Ragnhild Sollund makes a further case in relation to class and ethnic differentiation in the Norwegian in-home childcare market that although most of the Filipina au pairs living in Norwegian homes belong to the middle class in the Philippines (Parreñas, 2001), their reason for migrating and the work they do in Norway contribute to their being labelled as suitable domestic workers and lower class in Norway (Sollund 2010). Au pair immigration then contributes to the stereotype of Filipinas as employable servants and as ‘friendly’, ‘caring’ and ‘helpful’ (Sollund 2010. See also Anderson 2000, 2009; Cox 1999).

The transfer of private household labour from one group to another has broader effects, though, than simply reducing the domestic workload of a higher

status group of women. Rather, a racial division of domestic work reinforces and reproduces social practices such as racial discrimination, ideologies of domesticity and white womanhood (Palmer 1989), and class stratification. Commoditised reproductive labour that is organised along divisions of race, ethnicity and social class produces and reproduces broader structural divisions across society (Uttal and Tuominen, 1999:760) and accounts of the performance of paid care and domestic work in private homes can say much about how the transfer of household labour to others creates an unequal labour relationship. This is the case because the organisation of care and domestic work is widely found to be structurally hierarchical, low-paid and low-status and located in a precarious market (Uttal and Tuominen 1999).

Low pay, low status and ethnic and social class stratification have, then, been identified as contributing to in-home childcare becoming a ‘migrant’ sector in the UK and elsewhere around the world. Migrants are seen as suitable workers to perform childcare in private homes because of perceptions that they have fewer options than native-born workers, because it is understood that they are more likely to stay in low-paid, poor-quality jobs for longer periods than native-born workers (Anderson 2003) and because they are ‘different’ enough from employers to make the passing on of household tasks from what is often one woman to another less uncomfortable – for employers – than might be the case if it were two women of the same nationality and social class negotiating an employer-employee relationship involving housework and childcare within a domestic environment.

Migrant workers are also favoured for in-home childcare positions because of the perception that they are high-quality workers for low-skilled jobs. Anderson et al

(2006:102), for example, explain that employers perceive migrants as being more likely to have a strong 'work ethic' than native-born workers and this is important in their assessment of what is likely to constitute a better worker. Migrants are also seen as being more likely than native-born workers to possess a range of 'soft skills' (Wills et al 2010) that are linked by employers to the ability to perform childcare and associated domestic tasks to a high standard (Anderson et al 2006). The literature therefore identifies migrant workers as being suitable candidates for jobs in the in-home childcare sector not only because their limited options make them more likely to stay in jobs with inferior pay and poor conditions, but also because they are likely to 'meet customer expectations' (Anderson et al 2006. See also Cancedda 2001; Morokvasic 2004).

Explanations of raised levels of demand for migrants to perform childcare activities in private homes are qualified further in the literature by accounts of complicated ethnic hierarchies that are in operation across different state contexts (Anderson 2000; Bakan and Stasiulis 1995; Cox 1999, 2006; Parreñas 2001; Wolkowitz 2006). Geraldine Pratt (1997), for example, discusses the operation of ethnic hierarchies in Vancouver through her account of the effects on employment conditions and employer-employee relations of the stereotyping of British and Filipina nannies by employment agencies. Stiell and England (1999) also discuss the effects of ethnic stereotyping on the formation of hierarchies of in-home childcare employment through their research into the attitudes and behaviours of Canadian agency owners. They found that agency owners 'seemed keen on differentiating between "trained" nannies and "other" nannies, positioning one group against the other' (Stiell and England 1999:55). Being a trained nanny was associated with being

white and British while ‘other’ nannies were stereotyped as ‘Third World’ women. These authors have written about the operation of ethnic hierarchies in order to illustrate how racial stereotyping contributes to the ways in which the work done by migrant women has been devalued because it is what women, then ‘women of colour’, and, more recently, migrant women do.

In a range of contexts, then, the literature identifies the extent to which progressively more vulnerable migrants are preferred because they are a source of cheap, pliable labour, but the segregation of migrants in this low-paying sector in turn perpetuates the low status of the work involved. In the recent UK context, more specifically, increased migration – with a growing feminisation of migrant cohorts – has meant in-home childcare and associated domestic work is increasingly being performed by (mostly) women who are subordinate by virtue of their national origins and/or immigration status and/or their social class and their gender. The low-status of the work, the fact that it is performed behind closed doors in private homes and the subordinate status of the workers has meant that such workers are often ‘invisible’ to the people they serve, to income tax officials and to government authorities such as the UK Department for Work and Pension. The work that is performed is equally obscured from mainstream gaze and discourses and is widely under-appreciated and under-valued. The result is a labour market sector – and a gendered, racialised and classed group of workers – that exists either outside the formal labour market altogether or in which workers are formally employed but paid low wages for long hours.

The process by which care work performed by migrants has been downgraded in the UK can be seen in the light of changes in the way the term ‘nanny’ has been commonly applied. ‘Nanny’ has in the past usually been used to denote a ‘qualified childcare professional’ (Cox 2006; Gregson and Lowe 1994). However, analysis of advertisements for nannies and interviews with employers conducted for this article suggest that informally employed, low-paid childcare/domestic workers are also commonly referred to as nannies. Nanny, then, can now refer to (mostly) women who can be tasked with caring for children while also shopping, cooking, cleaning, driving, providing homework assistance, etc. Such nanny employment, occurring as it does in private domestic spaces and in the context of very low levels of state control, is characterised by high levels of informality (Cyrus 2008; Lutz 2011), which lowers the cost of hiring a nanny, thus making it affordable to a broader cross section of households.

The working conditions experienced by nannies in the UK are less likely to be defined by employment legislation and more likely to be shaped according to an ethnic hierarchy of labour in which women from poorer states are employed in lower paying jobs, involving longer hours and more arduous duties – eg cleaning, cooking and shopping in addition to childcare. Such positioning reflects the moulding effects created by the worker’s national origins, social class background, formal education level achieved, age, experience and degree of awareness of their options (Anderson 2009, 2010b).

The ways in which migrant workers are integrated into the broader UK childcare market, and the ways in which employers understand and negotiate the



availability of migrant workers, reveals much about how care work is devalued through being gendered, racialized and classed. This article discusses the manner in which migrant women have filled a 'childcare gap' in UK homes through being absorbed into the market for commoditised in-home care as low-paid, often informally employed 'nannies'. I focus in particular on the degree to which the employment of migrant women as nannies has required a renegotiating of employer/employee relations and inter-class boundaries in the UK, both within private homes and in terms of the broader childcare market, in the context of ongoing gendered devaluing of care work generally.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on primary data including 1) analysis of details of 400 job advertisements for nannies and au pairs that had been placed on internet listings site gumtree.com by prospective employers and 360 nanny wanted positions placed by five specialist employment agencies;<sup>i</sup> 2) 17 semi-structured interviews with employers, six of whom employed an au pair, 11 a nanny). The research employs mixed methods, which has been a common approach in the academic literature on the employment of migrants in private in-home childcare and domestic work and has been shown to produce useful information (Cox 2006; Gregson and Lowe 1994; Kilkey and Perrons 2008; Øien 2009, Williams and Gavanas 2008). The mixed-method approach included developing primary quantitative data sets by analysing advertisements placed by specialist agencies and by employers for nannies, au pairs and other forms of childcare. The data collected was not intended to be statistically generalisable. Rather, the aim of using quantitative methods here was to assist description of the market for in-home childcare in London and to provide a context

for theorisation of variations in the context of employment. Qualitative methods, meanwhile, included conducting interviews with employers of nannies and au pairs, which allowed for investigation into the experiences and responses of the employers in question. The methodology also required that qualitative data analysis could inform discussion of how this particular labour market relationship could be understood in terms of broader issues of inequality related to social class, gender, race and nationality.

The interviews with employers lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded and fully transcribed. They were semi-structured because it was necessary for the attainment of demographic profiles I wished to acquire that I asked a number of structured questions. However, it was important that after finding out some factual information, space was allowed for the different situations of the people interviewed to be reflected in how the interview proceeded (Sprague, 2005). In formulating this strategy I drew on precedents in the existing relevant literature that revealed that semi-structured interviews are the most common research method used when investigating the employment of migrant domestic workers (Cox and Narula 2004; Gregson and Lowe 1994; Hess and Puckhaber 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Øien, 2009; Parreñas 2001; Sollund 2010).

The interviews with employers included discussion of issues such as why they had sought someone to care for their children in their home; how they had gone about hiring this person, the pay and conditions of work offered, views on how national or ethnic background affected hiring decisions and the formality of the employment contract in terms of payment of tax and national insurance, etc. To

contact employers, I combined screening with asking acquaintances whether they knew people who employed an au pair or a migrant nanny. I then expanded the sample through networking and snowballing. The sample was of London-based employers, but I did not locate the sample in any single geographic area of London, focus on a particular social class group or restrict the sample to employers engaged in any single occupation. My aim was to assemble a mixed group of employers. In some cases, a father was my point of contact (four interviewees) and in some cases a mother (thirteen). I interviewed the party with whom I had initially made contact, rather than seeking to interview only mothers, only fathers or to have a specific proportion of each gender represented. The sample size was deemed appropriate for the aims of this paper as the intention was not to conduct a representative survey but to gain a thorough understanding through conducting relatively in-depth interviews with a manageable number of respondents. The sample size was also guided by precedents in the literature that revealed that meaningful findings could be arrived at from a sample of this size (see Cox 2006; Øien 2009; Sollund 2010).

### **The UK market for commoditised in-home childcare: blurred boundaries between au pair and nanny**

Migrant workers providing in-home commoditised childcare in the UK have been categorized in a number of ways – specifically as live-in or live-out nannies, au pairs, babysitters, maids, housekeepers or mother's helps.<sup>ii</sup> Gregson and Lowe (1994) found in their research conducted in the north-east and south-east regions of England that nanny employment is an 'occupational category characterised predominantly by young, unmarried women from white collar, intermediate status...the vast majority of the nannies in these areas had a professional qualification relating either exclusively

or partly to their work' (Gregson and Lowe 1994:124). Rosie Cox, like Gregson and Lowe, investigated the marketplace for domestic labour in the UK in the years before EU expansion in 2004. In this period, Cox also defined nannies as being 'normally trained and qualified childcarers who are competent to be sole carers of babies as well as older children...In theory, nannies are meant to be childcare professionals who are responsible for providing a caring and stimulating environment for their charges...it is not really meant to include too much other housework' (Cox 2006:72). Cox made a further distinction between those who can pay 'top dollar' and employ a Norlander, a nanny who trained at Norland College where fees of £24,000 are charged, and more 'informal families' who might employ a young nanny from overseas, particularly one from Australia or New Zealand (Cox 2006:86). Williams and Gavanas (2008) found that while au pairs in London are most often from Eastern European countries, domestic workers are most often from non-EU countries (such as the Philippines, India and Sri Lanka) and nannies are most often from South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Interviews with employers and analysis of job advertisements for nannies conducted for this article reveal that the term 'nanny' can still refer to a qualified childcare worker who is paid a weekly or monthly salary and whose duties are limited to child care and early education. However, it can also be used to refer to an informally employed (often migrant) worker with no relevant qualifications, who combines childcare with domestic work and is paid a low hourly rate or whose 'payment' includes accommodation and food. Eleven people who identified as employers of migrant 'nannies' were interviewed for this article. Of these, one employed a nanny from the Czech Republic, one from Bosnia and Herzegovina, one

from Serbia, one from Slovakia, one from Slovenia, one from Hungary, one from Australia, two from Brazil and two from Sweden. One employer had hired their current employee through an agency (three had used an agency in the past). Of the remaining ten, five had recruited through advertising for a worker directly on a website and one had met her nanny through word of mouth. The remaining four employers had promoted a woman working as a cleaner in their house to being the nanny. Only one employer had said she had required qualifications when hiring a nanny, and this only referred to when her children were babies, as she was one of the employers whose current nanny had been her cleaner. These findings suggest that one popular use of the term ‘nanny’ refers to a form of employment that is very similar to many au pair arrangements, with both being close to the duties expected of many domestic workers – i.e. required to do both housework and childcare and often to work longer hours – a job that has been associated with ‘Third World women’ (Stiell and England 1999:46). In terms of national origins of migrant nannies working in the UK, while women from the global South and non-EU European states are employed as nannies and domestic workers (Anderson 1993, 2000), particularly after 2004 the newer EU states became an increasingly important source (Anderson et al 2006).

The construction of a ‘nanny’ in terms akin to domestic service can be contrasted with the emphasis specialist employment agencies typically place on the ‘professional’ nature of a nanny job. This is comparable to Stiell and England’s account in relation to Canada that ‘during the 1980s, the term “nanny” started to be used more generally to include “unqualified” “Third World” women’ (Stiell and England 1999:55). As noted above, a market for the qualified nannies found by Gregson and Lowe (1994) and Cox (2006) still exists in the UK. However, there is

also a parallel market for the kind of ‘other nannies’ identified by Stiell and England as competing for work in the Canadian market, with many ‘other nannies’ in the UK being from A8 states and other European states or from poorer states outside Europe. These women are not necessarily in possession of childcare qualifications (although they may be highly educated), and ‘other nanny’ tasks commonly include cleaning and general household maintenance as well as childcare tasks. An important effect of the use of the term ‘nanny’ to describe this employment relationship is that it obscures the widespread informality of employment conditions and the low wages paid for long hours for what in effect is a form of household service – most commonly carried out by migrant women.

An au pair, meanwhile, has in the UK been defined as a young person who lives in a host’s home as a guest, while ‘helping’ with childcare and housework, for up to 25 hours a week. An au pair is to reside with a family to learn English and/or experience the culture of the UK and, as such, is not regarded as an employee; is not required to have childcare qualifications or experience and should not be charged with caring for a baby or an infant. However, the expansion of the EU in 2004 increased the number of people available for au pair placements who did not require a visa, while the abolition of the au pair visa in 2008 meant that in theory anyone doing childcare and/or housework can be called an au pair (Cox 2012). The loose use of the term au pair was confirmed in the course of this research by the frequency with which ads for ‘au pairs’ used the term to refer to a range of positions that might better be described as nanny, housekeeper, maid, etc. (with reference to duties, hours and pay offered). Employers interviewed also commonly referred to a person as an ‘au pair’

even though their place in the household did not involve any elements of cultural exchange.

The abolition of the au pair visa has, then, diminished the significance of recommendations and requirements regarding pay and conditions and weakened the cultural exchange/language aspect that was integral to the way the au pair visa scheme was understood prior to 2008. One effect of the post-2008 policy vacuum in relation to au pairs has been an increasingly blurred distinction between au pairs, nannies and other forms of live-in, often migrant, domestic worker so that the line between a ‘nanny’, as a form of paid employment, and the use of au pairs for a range of childcare and housework requirements is increasingly unclear. Instead, au pair and nanny categories are to a great extent interchangeable, with the difference resting on what parents – particularly those with a spare room to accommodate a live-in carer – feel they can get away with (Cox 2012).

The relatively lower cost of these forms of in-home childcare (for example, au pairs who can be given ‘pocket money’ of around £65-£85 a week and informally employed unqualified ‘nannies’, who are commonly paid an hourly rate of £8-£10) relative to nurseries has also meant that the employment of nannies and au pairs is no longer the preserve of upper- or upper-middle- class households in the UK. At the same time, those caring for children in the UK themselves come from a range of social class backgrounds and have a variety of reasons for being in the UK in this capacity. This is the case because global inequalities, war and oppression leading to refugee movements, and increased levels of international mobility, mean that migrants with relatively high social class backgrounds and/or formal education in

their home states can be found working in low-wage, low-status jobs in advanced industrial states (Williams and Gavanas 2008). Middle-class people in developing and post-Soviet states earn less than the working class in post-industrial states (Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008). Pratt (1997, 1999b), for example, finds that many of the Filipina women working as nannies in Canada have high levels of formal education (see also Sollund 2010). However, the fact that these achievements are routinely ignored or played down by employers is, Pratt suggests, connected to a desire on the part of employers to avoid examining why an educated Filipina woman was staying at home with the children while a Canadian woman was going to work (Pratt 1997). Pratt suggests further that these questions are uncomfortable not only because they draw attention to North/South inequalities, but also because they draw attention to the intensely fraught terrain of motherhood and the morality of working mothers.

In the UK, the spread in terms of households hiring an au pair/nanny and the diversity of people filling these jobs has impacted on how the employer and the employee understand themselves and each other in relation to traditional domestic service roles. That is, employers in the UK may be of an equivalent or lower social class and/or have equivalent or lower levels of formal education than their employees. In such scenarios, the fact of an employee being a migrant can replace social class differences as a useful element in a constructed subordination between master/mistress and servant.

**The ‘added value’ of migrant workers employed in the commoditised in-home childcare sector**



Employers interviewed for this article noted that many of the migrant nannies they had encountered had higher social class origins and/or levels of formal education than native-born in-home childcare workers they had interviewed or employed, and in some cases they explicitly compared a nanny's background and education with their own. However, they talked about this in terms of finding it easier to relate to people of a higher social class, or in terms of the added value that came with the higher levels of education 'their' nannies brought to the jobs. Moreover, unlike Pratt's findings (1997), employers were unabashed about explaining their understanding of social class inter-relations within their own homes in terms of North/South inequality. Finally, employers discussed their understanding of the added value of migrant workers' higher education in ways that suggested this made it easier for them to reconcile work with motherhood. That is, employers interviewed all attached great importance to the nature of the care they organised for their children, aiming to construct a form of care they felt was an adequate replacement for their own presence. It was felt that having access to workers who could bring their own experience of being from a 'good family', their social skills and their advanced education to the job was very reassuring for working parents.

This attitude was exemplified by Margot, an employer who said that her dissatisfaction with the nursery care available had led her to quit her job as a lawyer and care for her two children herself until she could find childcare that she was satisfied with. Margot's first attempt at this had been to hire an 'au pair' from Columbia.<sup>iii</sup> She said of this arrangement:

After the nursery we had an au pair for a month and that was a disaster. She was Columbian and was in law school but was on a summer break. Very bright, she came from a very good family. But she was a smoker, she lied, she was texting all the time, out with her friends all the time...

Margot's negative impression of the au pair from Columbia had not dissuaded her from her view that being from a 'good family' was important in the care of children. Rather, she went on to say:

So then I asked our cleaner to be our nanny...Childcare qualifications aren't important to me at all...But what I did want is someone who speaks very good English and who is intelligent looking after my daughters. I was disgusted by the language of some of the people working at the nursery – they couldn't speak grammatically at all. But, well, I'd definitely hire someone from Brazil again. Our one comes from a very good family. And she's intelligent and speaks really good English.

Margot felt that looking after young children is actually a rather skilled job in that it requires a combination of warmth, patience, domestic skill and intelligent conversation (in a second or third language). In the course of my interview with her, she talked at some length about why she had been so dissatisfied with the nursery that she had left her older daughter in and it was clear that her critique rested to a great extent on the low levels of education and poor motivation she had identified in the young, working-class women employed by the nursery. Margot felt that the women employed by the nursery were not required to take an interest in educating their young charges, nor were they required to display warmth or affection. Instead, she explained that they appeared to her to be akin to a posse of, as she put it, 'sullen teenage

babysitters'. Margot bluntly articulated a theme that was common to the employers of nannies (as well as au pairs) interviewed for this article. This is that middle-class parents want their children to gain a competitive advantage; they wish to produce children who are 'all above average' (Tronto 2002:42) from the earliest age possible and that personalised care in the form of a nanny – particularly a highly educated nanny – is deemed to be a better way of ensuring this than placing children in public or private day care (Tronto 2002).

In her account of the superiority of her choice of an au pair followed by a migrant nanny, then, Margot implied social class as a factor separating young, poorly paid nursery workers from her au pair and then a Brazilian cleaner turned nanny. Margot said of her employee's reasons for working as a cleaner and then nanny in the UK:

She has an Italian passport through family connections. So she can work here legally.. They're all here because they can make more money than they would in Brazil, I guess. Anyway, once you have one you get plugged into a network. Now the nanny's sister is our cleaner and we pass them around among friends.

Margot was untroubled by an 'intelligent' Brazilian woman, with 'really good' English, from a 'good family' working as a cleaner and then a nanny in her home. Instead, she implied this was because the woman could earn more in the UK than she could in Brazil and that she was simply pleased that the outcome of this global inequality for her was access to such a high-quality worker for this 'low-skilled' job. An acknowledgement of the positive effects of global inequalities for employers of migrant nannies informed the accounts of all employers interviewed. Vanessa, for

example, also employed a cleaner from Brazil who, along with her sister, went on to become a 'cleaning/childcare/educationalist package' for the household. Vanessa had come to this arrangement after dismissing her English nanny and discovering that the sister of her Brazilian cleaner had qualified as a maths teacher in her native state, but was working as a nanny in the UK. This conversation also led to her discovering that the original cleaner was also tertiary educated. Vanessa said of her arrangement:

The first nanny I hired was English and she was a trained nanny. But she wasn't very educated and I think she was unsure how to communicate with us, or with the boys really. I think they watched a lot of TV with her. We interviewed a lot of people after that, they were all foreign, but then we had a Brazilian woman working for us as a cleaner and she mentioned her sister...and we just sort of clicked with her socially. She's a trained teacher and she has ideas about what you should do with the children that I can relate to. The English one was trained but she had very different ideas to us, you know?

Margot and Vanessa based their preferences for a migrant nanny on negative assessments of British childcare workers, including nursery staff and nannies. This negative assessment was a common theme to emerge from interviews with employers, with two examples below being indicative of the range of reasons for hiring an unqualified migrant nanny over a qualified 'English' nanny that emerged from interviews.

Before our present nanny, who we have had for four years, we always had qualified nannies. The first one was English and had the NNEB. Then we had 5 years of Aussies and New Zealanders who had degrees in early childcare. I liked having Aussies and New Zealanders because of the get up and go culture. That wasn't the case with the English

nanny. But it is a bit of a class thing, isn't it? I got the impression that the Aussies were better off than the English nannies I've interviewed for jobs and that affects how they've been educated and how they are in the world.

Nathalie

We had one English nanny – bit of a disaster. She had real problems. So after that I took the whole qualified nanny thing with a pinch of salt. I wouldn't hire someone like that English nanny again. I can see that she took the job because she didn't have her own house, her own life really. But these girls who are coming to London, you can see why they need somewhere to live.

Emma

The disparagement of English nannies is more unexpected than a comparable low level of regard for nursery workers because while it is relatively uncontroversial that working in a nursery is low-paid, low-status work, and the plight of the au pair has received a growing amount of attention (Anderson et al 2006; Búriková and Miller 2010; Cox 2006; Hess and Puckhaber 2004; Øien 2009; Sollund 2010), the English nanny is still commonly regarded as a relatively high status job, particularly abroad (Cox 2006; Gregson and Lowe 1994; Stiell and England 1999).

None of the employers interviewed for this article had specifically looked for a migrant woman to be their nanny. However, the particular suitability of migrants for childcare and domestic work was phrased in terms reminiscent of Geraldine Pratt's account of why being a nanny in Canada was understood as a 'migrant job' – 'I don't

think there is a Canadian desire to be a nanny. I mean, we don't raise our children to be nannies' (Pratt 1997:162). That is, while UK employers associated a native-born person choosing a career in childcare as being indicative of low social class origins and low levels of formal education (as well as an absence of ambition), migrant women's choices were judged according to different standards and criteria. The perception expressed by all employers interviewed was that migrants might chose to become a nanny in the UK 1) while they established themselves and sought professional employment; 2) in order to earn more money than they could in their home state; or 3) while they pursued other objectives such as education.

Employers interviewed for this article also explained that higher social class backgrounds, advanced levels of formal education (specifically not childcare qualifications) and/or 'get up and go' separated migrant nannies from English nannies, and it was these attributes that were held up as being important to employers in terms of what made a good-quality childcare provider. Analysis of advertising for nannies on gumtree.com, meanwhile, reveals that employers cite attributes such as being 'educated', 'talented', 'cheerful', 'flexible', 'hard working' and 'capable', as well as being 'enthusiastic', 'loving', 'happy', 'easygoing' and 'self-motivated' as being more important than the attainment of professional childcare qualifications and employers interviewed explained that migrant workers were more likely to possess these characteristics than were native-born workers. This conflation of childcare and housework, and the assumption that the most suitable worker was likely to be a migrant, is further indication of a market for 'other nannies' (Stiell and England 1999:55) in the UK that runs parallel to Gregson and Lowe's earlier findings that nannies 'overwhelmingly' had childcare qualifications and were likely to be young,

white British women (Gregson and Lowe 1994:124). The fact that migrant nannies would also often combine housework with childcare – or provide a relative who could do the cleaning while they ‘moved up’ to childcare – was seen by employers interviewed as representing an added advantage.

Employers were therefore able to contextualise their apparent good fortune in being able to hire such ‘high-quality workers’ for lower-skilled jobs in terms of their understanding of constraints and options open to people in different countries. The understanding on the part of employers interviewed that migrant nannies were simply attempting to maximise their earning potential within a global market for care allowed employers to reconcile themselves to employing a qualified high-school teacher as an informally employed low-paid nanny/cleaner, for instance, because they see that the woman is doing this because of the pay differential between different countries. In this way, employers overlook or excuse their own complicity in exploitative labour relations within their own homes by ‘purifying’ and professionalizing the relationship and describing it as a form of ‘micro aid’ (Sollund 2010).

However, while tertiary education and being of higher social class origins are valued by employers, it is also the case that not having attained higher levels of formal education is understood differently for migrants than it is for native-born women. That is, while being a native-born women working in childcare is equated by employers with coming from a lower social class background, having low levels of formal education and having a lack of ambition, for migrants the very act of having arrived in the UK is equated with a degree of resourcefulness and get-up and go spirit,

which is then linked with being likely to have other transferable skills (Anderson et al 2006).

Nathalie had compared the get-up-and-go spirit Australian and New Zealand nannies had brought to the job with her English nanny's more pedestrian approach. She explained that her perception was that this was a 'class thing', so that 'better off' Antipodeans had more 'going on' than the less well-off English nanny. However, while she valued the more worldly, trained Antipodean nannies as carers when her babies were infants, her nanny at the time of interview was a Slovakian who had worked as the cleaner, who had no childcare qualifications and apparently low levels of formal education. Nathalie explained why she valued what this woman brought to the job even more than she had valued the Antipodeans' childcare qualifications, higher social class and adventurous spirit engendered by relative privilege, saying:

My kids are older now and the woman we have come to England from Slovakia as a cleaner. She was our cleaner, then she became a kind of cleaner, housekeeper, childcare person. Now her sister does the cleaning and she's the nanny. Her whole family is here, I think...Maria [the nanny] is fantastic. She's just...She shouldn't be a nanny, you know. She's a really bouncy, vibrant lovely person.

When asked to clarify what she meant by saying that Maria 'shouldn't be a nanny', Nathalie explained:

The moment I said that I regretted saying it, because I didn't mean to diminish her being a nanny, but she's, umm... I mean she speaks fluent English. She didn't speak a word of English when she came over here. I don't think she had a fantastically high level of



education in Slovakia, I suspect she left school when she was 16. The family is from a small village there. But she is actually a very bright, resourceful... The thing is, if she'd had better opportunities or wasn't from somewhere like that she would probably be doing something else. I mean, I wouldn't want to be a nanny. So the thing is, you get much better value for money hiring someone like her than you would hiring an English person who is kind of bottom of the heap, isn't she?

Nathalie's comments can be interpreted as suggesting that she understood that her nanny's lack of formal education was connected to her background in a rural area of an impoverished state, rather than a lack of ability or an absence of ambition. Nathalie, then, understands Maria to be a worker with highly developed 'soft skills' doing what has been classified as low-skilled work. The perception among employers that they want someone who is actually rather skilled to do what has been coded as a low-skilled job can be understood in terms of Wills et al's (2010) more generally applicable findings that many employers in the UK perceive migrants as being higher-quality workers than the native-born workforce who might be available for such jobs by virtue of their transferable skill sets.

However, regardless of social class in the country of origin, levels of formal education reached or qualifications, migrant women employed in the in-home commoditised childcare sector in the UK are commonly perceived, treated and paid as something akin to a domestic servant, rather than being perceived, treated and paid as professional childcare workers. In the eyes of employers, social class origins, formal education and hard and soft skill sets of migrant workers are understood within a context of employment in the downgraded, racialised, classed and gendered sector in which migrants are performing. This then allows the employer to understand (and,

more importantly, to treat in terms of pay and conditions) the worker as a subordinate. In terms of the broader incorporation into British society of migrant women working in downgraded nanny and nanny/au pair jobs, parallels can be drawn between the UK and Norway in that just as many Filipina au pairs living in Norwegian homes belong to the middle class in the Philippines but are perceived as being of a lower class in Norway, so the actual social class and levels of education of migrant nannies and nanny/au pairs in the UK becomes less important than the social class classification attached to their role as a member of a new 'servant class' in the UK. Employers see this social class standing associated with employment as more mutable than the social class of a native-born nanny, as there is a perception that the migrant nanny might rejoin a higher social class upon returning home or ascend the social class ladder in the UK after a period of employment in the in-home commoditised childcare sector. Employers understand, then, that they were accessing 'better quality' (i.e. of a higher or potentially higher social class and/or with more advanced formal education) workers by employing migrants instead of native-born workers. The reclassification of migrant workers as being identified with a lower social class in the UK then reduces potential issues of status that might make employers think twice about the very low wages, long hours and arduous duties frequently expected of the migrant women in their employ.

## **Conclusion**

Migration to the UK has increased since the late 1990s, with a particularly dramatic spike after the expansion of the EU to the east in 2004. Many migrants from the new EU countries are young and female and are well placed to take jobs in personal services such as the in-home commoditised childcare sector. Demand for paid

childcare has at the same time increased in the UK, as more middle-class women return to work soon after having children. Specific demand for in-home commoditised childcare has also grown in the UK as the cost of this form of care can be lower than care offered by nurseries or childminders. Also, hiring a nanny or an au pair fits with the UK's prevailing care culture, in which care of children at home by a mother, or a maternal substitute as the least-bad alternative, is the prevailing cultural stereotype of ideal parenting (Williams and Gavanas 2008).

This article discussed the ways in which migrant (mostly) women workers have been incorporated into the market for in-home commoditised care in the UK by drawing on primary data relating to analysis of job descriptions for nannies and by using transcripts of interviews with employers. The advertisements and interviews reveal that while employers did not specifically advertise for a 'migrant nanny', there were clear reasons why migrants were seen as the best candidates for the jobs. On a fundamental level, migrant workers were seen as being simply more likely to be available for low-status, low-paid rather demanding jobs than the majority of native-born workers, who were perceived as being more likely to have greater labour market options. Those native-born workers who did take jobs in in-home commoditised childcare were discussed in negative terms as being 'bottom of the heap', lacking in formal education, unambitious and representing poor role models for the children in their care in terms of language and guidance in improving activities. Native-born workers available for in-home childcare work were then held up against migrant women available for similar jobs, with higher social class, advanced formal education and/or 'get up and go' being attributed to the latter group.

Employers went on to expand upon their understanding of the effects of social class background – their own, those of migrant workers and those of native-born childcare workers – and formal education on employability as a nanny. Employers understood that for reasons of global inequalities, migrants available to work for them might come from relatively privileged social class backgrounds and have high levels of formal education. However, rather than avoiding examining this due to discomfort in admitting the benefits they accrued due to a North-South divide, as Pratt (1997) found in Canada, employers focused on the benefits to their children and their own preference for interacting with people of a comparable social class. In this way, they ‘purified’ and ‘professionalised’ this relationship by describing their encounters with global inequality through a discourse of ‘micro aid’ (Sollund 2010). However, I argued in this article that employers could only successfully navigate the relationships across equivalent or comparable social classes formed within their homes because of their employees’ status as migrants. In this way, ethnic difference stands in for the historically important social class difference in creating status markers that allow for the subordination of migrant in-home childcare workers by their employers.

The broader effects of the inter-relations between employers and migrant workers performing commoditised in-home childcare in UK homes is to reinforce and perpetuate the downgraded nature of childcare and associated domestic work in the UK through its construction as a gendered, classed and racialised sector of the labour market. In particular, the association of migrants as being particularly suitable for this form of work contributes to its invisibility in the eyes of the government departments and broader UK society. This invisibility contributes to a culture of informality and allows for the work performed by migrant women to continue to be largely

unacknowledged and, where it is noted, undervalued. An important step forward for migrant women performing commoditised childcare – and for women who perform more than their share of childcare and domestic labour generally – would involve the UK government taking steps to formalise and increase employment regulations defining ‘nannying’ as an occupation in the UK – in terms of qualifications, duties, wages, conditions and hours – and in doing this to step back from complicity in the ongoing slide toward tacit acceptance of a culture of exploitation and informal working arrangements. The impact on employers of more formal guidelines attached to employment of what is often migrant women to care for children in private homes would ideally be to create conditions for rethinking mindsets that allow relationships of subordination to be excused through attribution to the effects of global inequalities.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> The agencies are [chelseastaffbureau.com](http://chelseastaffbureau.com), [beauchampbureau.com](http://beauchampbureau.com), [slmrecruitment.co.uk](http://slmrecruitment.co.uk), [kennsington-nannies.com](http://kennsington-nannies.com) and [berkleystreetagency.co.uk](http://berkleystreetagency.co.uk).

<sup>ii</sup> Employment classifications used in this article refer to the terms employers used to define the worker they employed.

<sup>iii</sup> The fact that the woman was from Columbia suggested she was unlikely to have been in possession of an au pair visa (if this arrangement had been in place before 2008). Instead, the fact that Margot referred to her as an au pair was indicative of the extent to which anyone who does childcare or domestic work can be called an au pair.

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